

# NATURAL WINTER FOOD SOURCES FOR WINTERING WILDLIFE

Story by Jeb Williams, Photos by Harold Umber

*During fall, resident wildlife species concentrate on beefing up their fat reserve for the tough winter months ahead. Seeds and fruits, which ripen in the fall, are particularly important to migrating birds, as well as resident wildlife that normally require large fat deposits to withstand our long winters.*





Over time, some wildlife species have adapted to increased agriculture practices that have made food more accessible and fall and winter foraging easier. Corn, sunflowers, peas, millet, and other crops provide wildlife with valuable fall and winter food. Before agriculture, however, natural food sources sustained North Dakota wildlife, and natural foods are still the most important winter food source for many species.

The best winter wildlife foods are characterized by two qualities: persistence on the branch or vine, and low appeal during fall. Persistent berries are those that remain on the plant long into winter, such as hawthorne, hackberry, Russian olive, Siberian crab, mountain ash, American cranberry, sumac, snowberry and bitter-sweet.

Many of these same berries are initially unpalatable for wildlife and require freezing and thawing before they are desirable. Berries that persist into late winter are extremely important because they are available at a time when other natural (or unnatural) food supplies are limited or covered by snow. Songbirds and game birds alike benefit the greatest from this type of natural food source.

Other plants, which produce acorns or nuts, provide a quality food source for species like white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, squirrels, and wood ducks. These plants include bur oak, black walnut, and beaked hazel. Browsing plant-eaters like deer mostly eat leaves, buds, and young shoots. Some of the more common browse plants include sage, buck brush, cottonwoods and willows.

Winter food is vital to winter wildlife survival. However, North Dakota's grasslands, wetlands, badlands, and dense forested areas are a mastermind of wildlife necessities...much more than a food source. These areas are a resource that will continue to provide for and produce wildlife as long as we protect and conserve the habitat. Healthy habitats are the cornerstone to wildlife populations. Protect habitat and you will have wildlife.

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*Bittersweet*



*Cranberry*



*Mountain Ash*